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visible body with signed bonds,
 but mostly, about her cunt, she pressed
 the papers, wadding and girding her fruitful organs,
 shutting her sex from view, and access. This was
 her assent, her husband's dream, and my containment.
 I was speaking of love, and America; and how
 I value it, as I knew you did,
 when you wrote: 'I want to be a woman
 to a man so badly, I can taste it almost.'
 I was speaking of value, I guess. Of what
 knits in the spaces, where wind
 creases its frigid movements into the face
 as it swerves on. I was speaking of you,
 and of love once more: warm, intelligenced, exacting;
 of more immanent value than Hebrew parallelism
 or the Anglo Saxon metre.

On Jon Silkin's "Amana Grass"

Merle E. Brown

From *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1954), published when the poet was twenty-four, to his most recent poem, "Amana Grass," now printed here, for the first time, Jon Silkin's poetry has been pre-eminently social. His poems are populated; their creatures, whether plant, animal, or human, are invariably given value and often autonomy. These poems are many tongued, speaking with more than one voice even when containing only one person, and that the poet himself. Each creature and each voice, moreover, reverberates with a representativeness beyond itself; if the society of a poem seems small, intimate, and personal at first, upon repeated reading its range widens and implicates a community, a nation, a world, larger than itself. Finally, Silkin's poems are poems of social action: not at odds with the poet's intentions, the poems fervently demand change; at the least in the form of heightened awareness; at the most as a radical revision, in purpose and manner, of one's way of life.

Thirty years ago it was conventional to say that poetry and politics do not mix. Genuine poetry was thought to be contemplative; the true poet must be imper-

sonal, detached from his political surroundings and, even more important, aloof from the creatures within his own poem, his own poetic society. Social action poetry was simply not genuine poetry. The failures of the “gang,” of Spender, Auden, C. Day Lewis, et al. were confirmation of this puristic and at times Hermetic poetics. The ravages of Pound’s Fascist rage were the ruins of the Cantos. Either/or. Contemplate or fulminate. Some critics are still no doubt hooked by this dichotomy, but numerous poets have slipped free of it. Nor are they just gasping on the sand, mouthing intentions without poetic achievement. Silkin’s *Stands* are political as well as poetic erections, houses alive outwardly as well as inwardly. As a manual laborer, he was only a hod-carrier, helping to build low-rent tenements. As a poet, he builds houses not just for beauty, but also for use.

Silkin’s intentions are on record and unequivocal. The finest poems, for him, are not artifacts, but actions; they are driven by an “exploratory energy” with the poet not observing, but involved and participating. In a discussion with Anthony Thwaite, printed in *Stand* (v.6,n.2,1963), of which Silkin is the editor, he has this to say (taking off from a few comments by Thwaite on Elizabeth Jennings):

I still get that feeling of her isolation. I think the very position of observer tends to mean lack of involvement and therefore isolation; and this really underlines the big difference between us. You talk of distancing—I quite agree this kind of spacing between a poem or a poet and the situation/object/person he is writing about is necessary. But I have a feeling that the distance you speak of would be empty, whereas the distance I speak of would tend to have established in it a strong sense of involvement. . . . In other words, the poet would not be an observer; he would not wear the mask or the persona of an observer—he would be a participator . . . he would be less detached, and the element of detachment that I think you seem to favour brings in this system of closed working; that is to say as an observer you can already see the whole situation.

And if the moving action of a poem truly works, Silkin continues, it

draws the readers’ attention to certain contradictions and anomalies in society and says, Do you like these things, or even if you do, what will the end product be? In my terms the end product will be destruction. Therefore if we don’t want to destroy ourselves we have to change society; so that to say it again, when I talk about process, I don’t mean process in the abstract. I mean process in relation to the kind of society we have and the kind of changes we may or may not be able to foresee. For example, I see society moving towards a proletariat state. I think it ought to be helped towards this.

Although these statements are unequivocal, they do point to an uncertainty aris-

ing repeatedly in the minds of his readers: are Silkin's poems statements just like those he makes in his discussion with Thwaite, are they moralistic oratory; or are they genuine poems which move us to action in a different way, are they prophetic poetry in the sense all recognize many parts of *The Divine Comedy* to be? Are they poetry deeply corrupted by oratorical purposes or oratory elevated to poetic realization? Silkin himself might say that he simply does not care. In fact, in the introduction of his anthology, *Living Voices* (Vista Books: London, 1960), he urges readers to concentrate on themes and neglect techniques. Such a sense of political urgency might well make a poet deaf to inspiration. Whether it has done so is a question provoked again and again by Silkin's poems.

When a poem of Silkin's works poetically, it is composed of three essential, non-temporal moments. The first is the moment of pure joy, of the utter oneness of man and nature and god, the moment of a bird freed from its cage and touched by the gold of the sun, the moment when

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the suckling child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice's den.

Even in *The Peaceable Kingdom*, of which the verses from *Isaiah* are the epigraph, this moment of joy is accompanied by a second moment, a moment of pure pain, the moment of division in which men turn into stones grinding against each other, the moment in which all nature is "a preying upon," in which love turns into despair and man "dwindles to his size." Spanning and uniting and harmonizing these moments of pleasure and pain, however, is a third moment, the moment of "consciousness/Which love brings." This moment provides the necessary "spacing between a poem or a poet and the situation/object/person he is writing about." This is the moment of composition, of composing the poem, of integrating the disruptive and disintegrative forces of violence with the pure oneness of "the parent world" before it divided upon itself and mastering them in words of an achieved unity.

The presence of these three moments is the distinctive characteristic of Silkin's achieved poetry. Now, the need to temporalize such an essence, to view it as working itself out in the career of the poet, seems to be an unavoidable critical need. But it is a perilous business. It is the kind of thing that ruined Hegelianism. It is risky enough to affirm the continuity and development of the career of a philosopher or a politician. But of a poet? Poems are not logical and necessary productions, but rather contingent creations, as Silkin himself once said. What sort of Whole is the career of a poet within which the critic strives to place his individual poems? Some would say it is a deep psychic drive, others a particular stance toward the world, others a special poetics, a cluster of intentions concerning the kind of poetry desired, and still others a distinctive style or group of styles. But

every effort to spread out the poet's career as subsumed within such kinds of wholeness proves desperate. Whatever the wholeness of a poetic career may be, it is obviously most elusive. The real trouble, as I see it, is that every single, genuine poem is itself a wholeness richer and more intense than any "career" even the subtlest critic may construct. Each genuine poem sums up and culminates all the poet's past work and anticipates all his future achievements. Every genuine poem is the originative and organizational center of the poet's career. In other words, the poet has as many careers as he has poems. To reduce his poems, then, to a career that extends beyond them and includes them all is quintessentially futile. It must, because of the very nature of poems, each of which is a self-originate cosmos, be illicitly reductive, and destructive of those qualities that make up the distinctive greatness of poetry.

My temporalization of the essence of Silkin's poetry is, therefore, self-confessedly limited. Taking "Amana Grass" as his latest achievement, one may say that Silkin's earliest poems are dominated by the moment of joyous oneness and that with each new volume he becomes more acutely responsive to the pain and divisiveness of experience. *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1954) is suffused with a subjective light, with the poet's inner feeling of love for all the creatures of his world. Silkin's second volume, *The Two Freedoms* (1958), represents the breakdown of the peaceable kingdom; the poet has become self-conscious, he betrays again and again the fact that he has been studying Eliot's poetry closely, and he turns upon himself and tries painfully to plot the stages of his own past life. The very title of the third volume, *The Re-Ordering of the Stones* (1961), indicates that Silkin is trying to put his world back together, with a keen sense of the separateness of its elements. Most of the poems in this volume are statemental; the poet accepts his distinctness from others and takes his stand against them, against the liberals, the critics, and those who think it matters that a young woman has never heard of Pater. The fourth volume, *Nature with Man* (1965), reveals pain so sharp that the poet desperately strives to recover some sense of the oneness that so naturally encompasses *The Peaceable Kingdom*. The group of "flower poems," included in the fourth volume, are in my opinion an effort to mate man with nature on the model of the poet's oneness with animals in *The Peaceable Kingdom*. But the flower poems are just not a new version of St. Francis' "fioretti." Though evidently unhappy about it, the poet remains detached from what he gazes upon; the flowers themselves split into natural object and female type; the effort to fuse them is a desperate one. Since 1965 Silkin has published enough new poems (four in *Poems New and Selected*, Wesleyan, 1966, and a number in recent issues of *Stand*) to indicate that a new volume should be forthcoming. These new poems represent a major change in both his experience and poetry. As Isaac Rosenberg exposed himself as fully as possible to the agonies of the first World War, so Silkin has turned from his "holy island" and is exposing himself to the more violent aspects of contemporary experience. What else but Israel and America? The months spent several years ago in Israel and his three trips to America since 1965, one lasting two months and the most recent a full year, are indicative of this decision to abandon the last comforts, those of being located, and to open himself to the most alien of forces.

"Amana Grass" is Silkin's furthest extension in this direction and it is one of his major achievements. Since the poem is at hand and the poet has given his permission, it is the right place to concentrate a more detailed commentary on Silkin's poetry. The long lines of the poem, its intricate and often knotted syntax, the vastness and emptiness of its space, the violence and harshness of the imagery, the tortured and desperately abstract nature of the dialogue between man and woman, and, finally, the blatancy of the dream at the end of the poem, all these aspects may be summed up as an expansiveness and ugliness and painfulness which are the extreme opposite of the intimacy and harmony of *The Peaceable Kingdom*. No lines in the poem are sadder than those in which the man recollects the beginning of the love affair as a "peaceable kingdom" (two-thirds of the way through the poem, beginning with "Of anything gracious, firm there, and mild, didn't you add" and concluding with the one break in space in the poem). The line "In that decent stilness we did nothing that day," echoing as it does the words of Francesca (*Inferno*, V, 138), and the image of the peaceable kingdom, in which all plants consent to the love of man and woman, this nostalgia indeed is the most painful moment in the poem, coming as a cry of desolation out of the "wrathful and frigid bitterness" of the present encounter.

There is not another moment of loveliness in the poem. But the very harshness and ugliness of everything else is so masterfully controlled because the feeling of joy and the peace of love at its inception are the hidden measure, present as felt absence even between two individual words, against which that harshness is made manifest. Place, as an example, the line

In that decent stilness we did nothing that day.

beside the first line of the poem:

Amana grass, its spikes of hair rayed as branches.

The very sound of "stilness" takes on the quality of its meaning, the "s" sounds drawn out and almost fondled because preceded by the "s" sound in "decent." "Nothing" works as an unutterably soft word, being free of the more forceful "d's" which alliterate in "decent," "did," and "day." And that softness dominates the whole line, giving a delicate, lingering quality even to the final diphthong of "day." In contrast, perceive the almost rasping sound of the same diphthong in the "rayed" of the first line of the poem. The "s" of "spikes" is spit out, being preceded by the hiss in "grass" and "its." These sounds are so ugly because dominated by the nastiest sound in mid-western American English, the nasal "a" repeated four times in the line (the second, accented "a" of "Amana" and the "a" of "grass," "as," and "branches"). Even the "h" of "hair," which can be soft, here has a humping, almost grunted effect. In ugliness the line could hardly be surpassed, but only of course if it is heard with the inner ear, attuned to the missing loveliness which echoes faintly throughout the poem in the anguished ear of the poet. Listened to in this way, the tonal quality of the entire poem is fierce and borders on brutality. The way Silkin succeeds in vulgarizing the word

"sucked" in the second line, preparing for it with "stems, is" and also with the falling pause of the syntax before the "is," with that fall accentuated because preceded by the cracking mouthful of "branches," is the kind of feat repeatedly achieved in the course of the poem. "hot and diesel" gets its obscene quality because of that "sucked"; the whipping movement of "wraps," enhanced by the "w" of "wind" and the thud of its "d," also takes on harshness from that "sucked." And the "a" of "wraps" rasps as it does because of the "tracks" just before it; and "tracks" hurts because the ear has already cringed at the nasal "a's" of the first line.

If the entire poem is listened to properly, then a fierce note of sarcasm can be heard even in its last sentence:

I was speaking of you,
and of love once more: warm, intelligenced, exacting;
of more immanent value than Hebrew parallelism
or the Anglo Saxon metre.

The dominant tone of the lines is a sombre sadness, a regret that love between speaker and woman has disintegrated according to the law of entropy. The words of this man from "north England" are even touched with self-doubt. He has, after all, been speaking a long time with no response from the woman. Her last statement had been "I don't have value." The man then recalled for her the beauty of their love in its initiatory stage.

'That may be so,' she said
stepping from the door.

The poet then cuts her off. From her previous argumentative manner, one may assume that she would have gone on from "That may be so" with a "but." The speaker, however, cannot put up with more discussion. Thus he launches into his ninety-line lecture about America and its injustices which undermine love, about his own need to keep a sense of the woman alive, to think of her as capable of love, and finally about his dream of the hire-purchase man (an installment collector) and his wife. How, one wonders, could he conclude, after all this, by saying: "I was speaking of love"; "I was speaking of value"; "I was speaking of you"? Such obvious and flat statements can only suggest that the woman has gestured in such a way as to show that she hasn't the faintest idea what he has been talking about. Or has she gone to sleep? Or been out for a walk? What one can say for sure is that the long harangue is followed by absolute silence. But the speaker is not entirely unaware of this. In fact, he isn't speaking to the woman any more. Why, for example, refer to "Hebrew parallelism and the Anglo Saxon metre"? Nothing the woman has done or said suggests that she might value matters of poetic technique excessively. The fact that he has lost the woman's ear must, of course, deepen the despair with which the poem ends. The man may value this love even though it has disintegrated according to the inexorable law by which winter follows spring; but there is no sign that the woman agrees or dis-

agrees. She's asleep. Out of this futility, however, the man has turned outward and sarcastically affirmed the obvious. To and against whom?

Us of course. American poets and readers, men so attuned to technology that they respond to matters of technique rather than substance even when reading so serious a poem as this. American poets who establish Poetry Workshops as if poetry were agile techniques for moving words about like counters to achieve striking patterns. American critics who analyze the tonal qualities of "Amana Grass" in order to accentuate its masterful effects. One recalls R. P. Blackmur's response to a performance by the City Center Ballet: "the terrifying vision of proficiency beyond conceivable impulse": and his comment that, in our hysteria and abstractness, "We Americans have the technique to bring something to performance so well that the subject is left out."

If one turns to the subject of "Amana Grass," as he ought after being so harshly castigated by the last words of the poem, he will understand why he was so willing to leave the subject out. The love affair is obscene. The woman from Vermont and the man from England are grotesque, without alleviating humor, either on their part or on that of the poet.

The spirit dilates; the fleshy circlet starts its flow.
Older, he prepares: on his breast heraldries of self-power
chevalring love
stain him: on her breasts, prints of the stain.
He presses her down, she helping him, parts her, and enters.
She won't move. Forced to him, and pinned, she can't.
The spike piercing the belt that holds it as it stiffens
upon the bar; tightened upon each other:
So he in her, so she round him.

This is pure sex, untouched by love, not "tinged with fire" and offering no "annealed unearthly cries/as vigorous spirit for our earthly needs." No, here spirit is semen. Bodily organs work as things; words add nothing except cold, analytical awareness. One can, of course, accept the fact that "witchery,/the sapphired and webbed flesh of angels/is now unseen against the sky"; but couldn't the thing be lightened and made vivid by some Rothian humor? Or, to be more serious, couldn't the poet have introduced some stunning lines like those Stevens used to present forty-year-old lovers?

Our bloom is gone. We are the fruit thereof.
Two golden gourds distended on our vines,
Into the autumn weather, splashed with frost,
Distorted by hale fatness, turned grotesque.
We hang like warty squashes, streaked and rayed,
The laughing sky will see the two of us
Washed into rinds by rotting winter rains.

Instead of something fine like that, all we are given is talk about "creatures or plants, in symbiosis" and flat statements like "a plant thickens its xylem/from water for more of it." Even the woman's tenderness is felt, by the man, "as if excremental, evacuated from her." The substance of the poem is decidedly unpalatable.

Nonetheless, it is not exact to call even the sexual intercourse of the poem obscene. For the act is in ratio to the scene. This is the love possible in this place. The clause "He gets off her, hot and distanced" recalls the train's length, "hot and diesel." The separateness even of the parts of the woman's body, in "her thighs are separate in distress and coldness," recalls the separateness of the houses in the opening scene and the separateness of the woman's face and legs and thighs as she is first seen walking in the snow. The man's "heraldries of self power" are anticipated by the "heraldic egotisms" of nature which "silently conflict." And underlying both act and scene is the sense of the most grotesque line in the poem, the one which perhaps offends us most:

The soil, from stone, in passivity, grins; is to ingest all.

We are all stones; the soil is composed of our disintegrations; we are all ingested into the soil, which grins madly. But the poet does not grin. His words are like the wind:

Wind appears to feel out crevice,
and surface. Does not feel, no pain at all in how it contacts.

The poet never denies the beauty of early love, but he sees and touches nothing in the present scene except the grotesqueness of stale love.

Nor is there anything redeeming about the harangue with which the poem ends. The man's speech is very ugly, as he lists the attributes of brutal America, "in this disorder." Ugh. He generalizes a view of America, as ugly, in its abstractness, as the opening scene and the intercourse are in their concreteness. The man is in an ugly situation and his thoughts about it are as ugly as it is. The pathos of his need and the futility and weak sarcasm at the end provide no relief.

If Silkin sees himself, his woman, his situation, even his pronouncements as so harrowingly ugly, one is moved to ask how he can endure it. That he can and does endure it is, without question, one of the most striking aspects of the poem. St. Francis loved himself even though he considered himself to be the humblest of God's creatures; but he believed that God had chosen him for his mission just because he was so low. There is nothing lowly in Silkin's conception of himself in *The Peaceable Kingdom*. He is king of that kingdom and all the animals go into the ark "in my poems." He is not, to be sure, the king who has the three birds who were saints killed. He is not Caesar, but . . . In more recent poems, however, his estimate of himself is much lower. As early as "The Two Freedoms" (1958), he turns on himself with vicious irony. Thereafter, the irony disappears, but the lowliness in his estimate of himself remains. At the end of "Brought Up With Grass" (1966) he says:

I am shaped
Crab wise; or as a fly
Infecting with vomit and
The orts of virus
A bit of carrion.
Tusk of rampant fish.

His lines on the worm (*Stand*, 8 i, 1966):

It breaks
Tons of soil, gorging the humus
Its whole length; its shit a fine cast
Coiled in heaps, a burial mound, or like a shell
Made by a dead snail.

for me, at least, fuse his sense of the worm, leaving its well-wrought urns behind as it gorges the humus, with his sense of himself, leaving his poems behind. This may involve a feeling of sheer hilarity untypical of Silkin's poetry, but it is not a farfetched idea about the poem, especially if it is read with the poem printed next to it, "Creatures," in which "the spiral/Wriggling creature" leaves behind it a shell that resembles a poem very closely,

A pattern, a repetition of curving
Continuous shape, for survival.

It is one thing, however, to love oneself as lowly in an indirect or symbolic form, and quite another to love oneself in all one's meanness in a direct, dramatic form. Such love is the amazing thing in "Amana Grass." Silkin presents himself as a man doing the commonest thing, making love, in details as common and ugly as possible. How can he love anything so detestable?

One would not expect anything like this from an American poet. Stevens floods the foolish images of himself (the uncle or Crispin) with dazzling language. When James Wright says "I have wasted my life," one notes the delight with which he makes so fine a statement and recognizes that he has withdrawn from the waste and is bathing in a mystic vision of nature. Or, to move to something closer to "Amana Grass," Galway Kinnell's "The Bear": Kinnell endures the image of himself in the poem as a hunter who must eat "a turd sopped in blood" in order to stay alive and who becomes identified with the bear he has killed and thus a kind of Bear-Poet; he endures this sense of himself as grotesque by turning it into a kind of mythic or symbolic figure, detached from the common details that would accentuate the detestable aspects of himself. Compared to so much recent American poetry, in which the detestable creaturely self of the poet is generalized into "a full-blooded Sioux Indian" or obliterated in a vision of nature, in Minnesota, the Northwest, or Japan, Kinnell's "The Bear" is a courageous acceptance of himself as he is, preyed-upon and predatory, violent and weak. Even so, it is mythicized, beautified, so that the meanness is submerged

in meaningfulness. It is this process of beautification which permits Kinnell to write musical, rhythmical lines and to include so romanticized a phrase as "wandering over the world." Perhaps superior insight lies behind the fact that American poets so often appear before us as disguised prophets, robed priests, delicate gurus, wandering Jewish comedians, and forty-year-old adolescent guitar players. As our representatives, they may be so contemptible as to need ornamentation in order to be poeticized. Kinnell, of course, does not appear in disguise; he takes himself most seriously as a man who writes poems. Even so, his poems hum in a mythic sphere. Their power is dependent on that.

As an American reader, then, I find the crabbed, cacophonous lines of "Amana Grass" and the vulgar figure of the poet as lover and lecturer distinctly odd. I ask if this self-acceptance on Silkin's part is a vestige of "British character," if it is not somewhat archaic, indulgence possible now only in a nation stripped of political and military power. It is as if the very vulgarity of the poem is a dream, as if the courage to accept oneself as a pompous ass is made possible because one lives in the past.

The poem itself, however, makes such questions seem weak and craven. Its world is ours, incredible as public and unbearable as private; and yet the poet makes it both bearable and credible. He does it, I think, partly because the vital impulsion of his nature is simply unquenchable. The joy of the peaceable kingdom, even though it is now only a memory, is still an indestructible passion, an invisible shadow just behind the hardness of the language. More important, he does it because of his certainty that such joy and harmony must fragment into stones grinding against each other. It is in the very nature of love (see "The Measure" in *The Re-ordering*) that it turns into despair and reduces men to their size as mere creatures. If one continues to love himself and others, even as diminished and vulgar and obscene, then out of such despair and love a higher consciousness is born, lens-like and yet compassionate. Such consciousness is the dominant imaginative action of "Amana Grass."

As a man in the poem, Silkin recognizes the inexorability of the dissolution of the peaceable kingdom. The fear and isolation, "what men cancerously die of," in America, an America felt to be "brutal, shanked; a magnificence/of Roman cloth umbering an Etruscan shade," this is what it means to be a man, not just an American. Thus the grotesque dream at the end not only contains the American wife's "assent, her husband's dream," but is also "my containment." At the same time, the poet as a man within the poem scathingly attacks the impersonal violence and "the unassailable defection from honesty" that for him characterize America. The poem is social action poetry in the radical sense, in its fiery insistence that we change, that we be other than we are. As a whole, then, the poem is deeply rifted. America is as it is because it cannot be other than it is. The dissolution from intimate oneness to impersonal alienation is the inexorable law of life. But America must be different from what it is; the woman must learn to be a woman for a man, her shape "in durable contour." The end-product is and cannot be other than destruction: it will be other, if we learn to value love, that which "knits in the spaces, where wind/ creases its frigid movements into the face/ as it swerves on."

As a poem, however, "Amana Grass" contains and cures this aching contradiction in Silkin's nature. In "Brought Up With Grass," after referring to himself as "shaped/ Crab wise; or as a fly/ Infecting with vomit and/ The orts of virus," he goes on:

Or whatever
I am I am, too
Lens-like to
The skin's infection, its movement,
Transist into the meaning of
The configured shift of burning wood.

I will work to survive
With what will work.

I cannot bear not to
See clearly.

I qualify
Others by their concavities. I form that whole
Of creatures creeping together.
A bit of metaphor
A clear one.

The poem itself is "A bit of metaphor," a "putting over," "An amnion, a house," "A pattern, a repetition of curving/ Continuous shape, for survival." By means of it, the poet and man can survive. He may believe in the law of entropy, but he works actively against it, as poet, editor, citizen, and lover. He may himself be many creeping creatures, with discordant voices, but by metaphor he can "form that whole/ Of creatures creeping together." As he says in "Asleep?" (in *The Re-ordering*):

Pain is complex, something akin
To a stone with veins of colour
In it, that cross and cross
But never reconcile
Into one swab of colour
Or that stone that contains them.

Even the concluding lines of "Amana Grass," in their sombre sadness and as a smack against us American technicians, do not "reconcile/ Into one swab of colour." As a stone, as an artifact, "Amana Grass" is full of irreconcilable "veins of colour." As an imaginative action, however, as the shaping action of a master technician, whose every device is driven by a passionate love of himself and his world, the poem is an individual whole, a bit of metaphor, proud, lens-like, and compassionate.